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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a proposal for a possible second Norwegian television channel (TV 2) which has attracted interest from all parts of Norwegian society. Some major dimensions that pertain to the TV 2 issue are set forth and discussed, including: (1) whether or not a new channel should be established; (2) whether it would be a commercial or non-commercial channel; (3) whether the new channel would be independent or part of the public broadcasting corporation (NRK); (4) what the impact of foreign television would be on Norwegian society; (5) whether TV 2 should be nationally or locally based; and (6) what role should be played by the television audience. This analysis provides a conceptual framework to be used in a broader European perspective, depending on whether the experience described is genuinely Norwegian, typical for small states, or valid for Western Europe in general. (CGD)

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THE MEDIA REVOLUTION IN A SMALL STATE PERSPECTIVE: THE CASE OF NORWAY

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is an introduction to a more comprehensive study, where Norway is used to discuss several important issues caused by the recent advances in media technology. Perhaps the most profound change coming out of this development, is the internationalisation of culture made possible by satellite television. We think that Norway provides a good case to examine the problems as seen from a small nation-state in the European periphery.

The purpose of the present analysis is to develop a conceptual framework that can be used in a broader European perspective. In our forthcoming study we intend to examine whether the experience described is genuinely Norwegian, typical for small states, or valid for Western Europe in general.

THE NORWEGIAN ANSWER - A SECOND TELEVISION CHANNEL

In lots of social thought, cultural change is considered to be a reflection of changes taking place in the economical sphere. Today, the greatest technological advances pertain to the cultural sphere, with satellite television as the most spectacular result. In this way, television has become an arena where both cultural and economical actors have a stake in the outcome of events.

We think this provides us with an understanding of the Norwegian interest for a second television channel. Early in the 1980's, a number of issues appeared on the media agenda. Only a few years later, most of these issues had either disappeared, or they were incorporated in the TV 2 issue. Gradually, a second television channel had become the very answer to the challenge from new media technology.

It all happened very rapidly. As late as the winter of 1983, a

governmental committee had maintained that a second television channel was too expensive even to be considered. However, this committee was appointed by a Labour government that was no longer in office. It took less than half a year for the new conservative government to appoint its own TV 2 committee. Two years later, the proposal for a second channel was submitted. In the meantime, a number of private organisations and interest groups had proposed their own solutions to the TV 2 issue.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

Our analytical point of departure is a simple communication model based on the familiar relations between sender, medium, message, and receivers or audience.

The organisation of any mass communication process requires that a number of decisions must be taken. Most fundamental of them all, is of course whether a new medium or channel should be established. Other important issues relate to who should operate the channel, its financial form and the relation between finances and content, the type of content and who should produce it, the channel's geographical distribution, what role the audience should play, and so on.

As mentioned above, the TV 2 issue has attracted interest from all parts of the Norwegian society. Hence there are diverging opinions on every decision-making point. The game between actors, then, will be decisive for the kind of TV 2 model we will have.

DIMENSIONS OF THE TV 2 ISSUE

Although the initial plan has been ready for a while, policy-making is still in the midst of an agenda setting process. It is therefore too early to tell on what grounds the final decision will be taken. However, it is possible to discern some major dimensions of the TV 2 issue.

Yes or no to a new television channel

Whether the new channel is wanted or not, is obviously the most fundamental issue of them all. For the time being, this question is out of the public debate, but there is in fact a great deal of opposition against TV 2. For instance, repeated opinion polls indicate that only about half the population really want a new channel. Parts of the cultural elite are sceptical to more television in general. Within trade and industry there are groups who fear they will have to sponsor TV 2 without really getting the benefit of it, and so on.

A commercial or non-commercial channel

From the very beginning, TV 2 has been thought of as a commercial channel. The initiative came from a Conservative party, and like its sister parties in all of Western Europe, it is in favour of more commercialism in broadcasting. In Norway, however, this implies a very fundamental change, since advertisers have been excluded from broadcasting in the whole postwar period. Even the private radio stations licenced by the Conservative government four years ago, are not yet allowed to carry advertising. Therefore, we have the paradoxical situation that the financing of the second channel was thoroughly planned before anything was decided about its establishment. The government's first act in the TV 2 issue was to appoint a committee on advertising in broadcasting.

However, in Norway the demand for commercialisation concerns the financial form only. When it comes to content, no significant actor really wants commercial television. The actors who are primarily interested in advertising, take little part in the discussion of the content. Their main objective is to obtain a channel where they can compete with foreign advertising on equal terms. The cultural actors, on the other hand, see TV 2 as an

opportunity to disseminate their own message. Since the 1930's, broadcasting in Norway has been considered a cultural institution for the enlightenment of the people. This opinion is so inherent in our culture that even commercial actors find it hard to believe that broadcasting could be anything else. Thus, among the proponents for an independent TV 2 we now find an alliance between cultural and economical actors that hitherto was unknown. So far, they have expressed common interests in advertising as a financial source. The fact that advertising will have far-reaching effects on the type of programmes that can be offered, has not yet been considered.

A competitive model, or return to the monopoly

A third major dimension is whether the new channel should be independent or part of the public broadcasting corporation (NRK). Actors in favour of an independent TV 2 are in fact demanding a completely new broadcasting model where free competition plays a major role. A competitive model is considered a way to improve television in general. It will provide Norwegians with a better channel, and hopefully even improve the former monopoly. Actors arguing along these lines are clearly on the offensive, and much opposition has been silenced.

Yet there are important actors lobbying for the view that television cannot be controlled unless it is part of the public monopoly. In fact, these actors represent the main cultural tradition in Norway. A major result of the welfare state is that even the cultural sphere has become a public responsibility. Hence the main criteria for recognition as an important cultural activity, is that one has become worthy of public regulation. Among the mass media, only entertainment media like the weekly magazines, children's cartoons, and so on, are left to free competition in the market. Therefore, the proponents of a competitive television model, easily end up in a conflict between competitive means and cultural goals.

The impact of foreign television

The fourth dimension of the TV 2 issue has to do with the internationalisation of television. Its history dates back to the 1970's. After the WARC conference in 1977, the Nordic countries started investigating the possibility of a joint Nordic satellite (Nordsat). The purpose was to establish a bulwark against domination from Angloamerican and Continental satellites. The Nordsat idea died, but the fear of foreign satellites was now put on the agenda for years to come.

In the 1980's, satellite television has become a reality. Norway was among the first countries to allow reception of Sky Channel. This experience certainly has not diminished the fear. Among the social elites it is now a widespread opinion that the quality of foreign satellite television will be very poor. It is also realised that this kind of television will be available in abundance, and that the effect of this most certainly will be negative to the Norwegian society.

However, it is not intuitively evident what is so wrong with foreign television. About one half of NRK's present output is of foreign origin, and the imported programmes are certainly of variable quality. In fact, when NRK first reacted to the TV 2 challenge, it proposed a pay-television channel, almost totally based on foreign programmes, and transmitted by satellite. The pay-TV plan immediately became controversial; however, it was not the foreign content which was most provocative.

The main argument for the pay-TV channel was actually that it would provide us with a cultural defense against foreign satellites. Admittedly, the intention was gradually to "nationalise" the channel by reinvesting the surplus, but even as a pure import channel, it was considered a cultural defense. This may seem a bit contradictory. The argument, however, was that

when edited in Norway, the foreign import was brought under national control.

We feel that a substantial part of the media situation in Norway may be understood by this line of reasoning. The traditional way of handling foreign television is one of strict control, and for motion pictures even downright censorship. Video stroke the first blow against this control system, but today most of the video market is regulated. The satellites, however, are beyond control, and as mentioned above, this implies that they cannot be included among the serious mass media. On the other hand, the satellites represent an important democratic principle - the free flow of information. Thus, today Norwegian media policy making is facing an insoluble dilemma.

A nationally or locally based channel

The fifth dimension in our analysis, is whether TV 2 should be nationally or locally based. The proponents for an independent and commercially founded channel are in general also in favour of locating its headquarters outside of Oslo, of decentralised programme production, and of locally oriented programme output. From an economical point of view, this outspoken interest for local values is not easy to grasp. Neither are the motives explicitly stated. However, a number of possible reasons are discernable.

First of all, it should be noticed that the relation between center and periphery is generally important in Norwegian policy making. It is difficult to make any change in the Norwegian society unless the consequences for the districts are taken into consideration. A locally based TV 2 is therefore thought of as a way of vitalising the periphery.

However, the phenomenon can hardly be understood unless our historical heritage is taken into account. As late as in the

first decades of this century, Norway was still striving to obtain the same cultural independence from Denmark as was gained politically a hundred years earlier. During the centuries of Danish rule, the towns had been bridgeheads for Danish culture. On the other hand, the genuinely Norwegian culture had survived in the rural areas. Therefore, it became obvious that revitalisation of Norwegian culture had to depart from the districts. The experience of this has certainly influenced the Norwegian way of coping with threats from a foreign culture.

The impact of the audience

So far, we have discussed the positions held by elite actors in the game to influence the TV 2 issue. Our final dimension concerns the role to be played by the television audience.

We know that this role differs according to the broadcasting model. A commercial channel depends on consent from the audience for its very survival. This of course has important bearings even upon the programme policy.

The broadcasting monopoly, however, may largely disregard the audience. This is particularly so in a country like Norway, with a strict monopoly, a compulsory licence fee, and little freedom of choice.

So far, the audience has not been taken into explicit consideration in the TV 2 issue. An inherent condition for the thoughts and ideas presented, however, is that the audience will react to the new media situation in certain ways. As mentioned earlier, the cultural elites seem to believe that the audience will support the new channel almost regardless of content. This paternalistic attitude is clearly an intellectual heritage from the one-channel monopoly.

While the cultural elites seem to overlook the audience, the

economical elites want to keep them off the agenda. They know that they need support from cultural elites in order to overcome the barrier against advertising. In return, the cultural elites may be given free hands to propose content for the channel. The economical elites may do so in full confidence that once commercial financing has been introduced, the content must be what the audience wants.